



UConn human rights class advocates for scholar imprisoned in Iran

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A human rights advocacy course at the University of Connecticut has been contacting legislators around the world and asking them to protect a scholar of disaster medicine who has been imprisoned in Iran since 2016.

The HRTS 3540/5351 course, Topics in Human Rights Practice, is taught by Sandra Sirota, an assistant professor in residence at UConn and director of the Human Rights Close to Home initiative at the Dodd Center. This semester, her class is focusing on the case of Dr. Ahmadreza Djalali, who students chose from a list of academics facing unjust restrictions, prosecution or imprisonment created by the Scholars at Risk network.

Djalali visited Iran for a series of workshops held by universities in Tehran and Shiraz in April 2016 and then was wrongfully arrested and detained for “collaboration with hostile governments,” according to Scholars at Risk. He was given a “corruption on earth” charge on Oct. 21, 2017 which carries a death sentence based on allegations he provided intelligence to Israeli authorities that the Iranian government hasn’t released evidence for, the advocacy network said.

Djalali has denied those charges and claims his ties to the international academic community are the basis of his detention at the Evin prison in Tehran and death sentence charge. Israeli airstrikes hit several buildings at Evin prison on June 23, 2025, and killed at least 80 people including prisoners, family members and prison staff, according to the Human Rights Watch.

Students said last year’s attacks along with the U.S.-Israeli war with Iran that began during the semester has contributed to the Djalali’s risk and changed their advocacy approach. Solé Blanks, a human rights master’s student, said the class was originally advocating for his release but decided to shift to include more attainable approaches, like focusing on Djalali’s lack of access to appropriate medical care in the prison.



Ahadreza Djalali and wife Vida Mehrannia with their child. UConn’s HRTS 3540 course, Topics in Human Rights Practice, focused on the story of Djalali.. PHOTO COURTESY OF PINTEREST

Blanks said that even though Evin prison has a history of human rights abuses, bombing the prison is unnecessary due to the impact the bombs had on the prisoners facing abuse.

“War has complicated things so much,” Blanks said.

The death penalty charge for Djalali was one area in which multiple students felt advocacy for the scholar was necessary, even if the conditions of his release were complicated. Blanks said publicity will hopefully make his execution by Iran less likely.

“If the whole world’s watching and tracking his movements, it makes it less likely for something to happen to him,” Blanks said.

Ethan Volpe, a sixth-se-

mester political science major from the class, shared a similar sentiment.

“We had to keep lowering and lowering the goalpost,” Volpe said about how the class decided on the best way to advocate for Djalali. “After bombing, we just want his name out there. Social media has been a big part of that.”

The class was split up into three sections halfway through the semester which focused on different advocacy methods for Djalali. This included advocacy to European legislators, advocacy to U.S. legislators and outreach through social media and class presentations, a group that was added onto Djalali’s case after their scholar was released from prison.

The other scholar students had focused on in the beginning was Marfa Rabkova, a student at European Humanities University in Lithuania who was sentenced to 15 years in prison for nonviolently protesting the re-election of President Alexander Lukashenko, according to Scholars at Risk.

Nishi Kapoor, a human rights graduate student, said she originally chose to advocate for Rabkova’s release because she was the only woman scholar at risk given as an option for the class to choose out of the seven scholars.

Rabkova was released from prison on March 19, during the students’ spring break, along with over 200 other prisoners in Belarus after the U.S. agreed to lift some sanctions during negotiations,

according to the Associated Press.

“It was definitely cool to see them get released,” Kapoor said about the prisoner exchange.

When the Rabkova advocacy group switched to Djalali’s case, Kapoor said their goal became to push his name and their class’s campaign as much as possible.

“We don’t even know if he’s alive, but anything helps,” Kapoor said.

Rabkova’s release marked the first time in the class where an imprisoned scholar the group focused on was resolved during the semester, Sirota said. In the two other times the course has been offered, two of the scholars were released, Niloufar Bayani from Iran and Khalil Al-Halwachi from Bahrain, about a year after class advocacyhttps://dailycampus.com/2021/11/05/uconn-offers-new-human-rights-course/.

Sirota said her class has contacted eight different legislative representatives about the human rights violations Djalali is facing and has gotten three different responses. When her class had the opportunity to talk to Connecticut Sen. Chris Murphy at a Student Advocacy Days 2026 event in Washington D.C., Sirota said he gave a hopeful response.

Murphy discussed the possibility of negotiations in Iran involving a prisoner exchange that adds hope to the possibility Djalali could be released, she said.



The logo for “Human Rights Close to Home.” This is an initiative that engages educators and youth in the development and implementation of human rights education.. PHOTO COURTESY OF @UCONN_ECE ON INSTAGRAM

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